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Paris curator Mélanie Bouteloup, director of Bétonsalon, at the offices of Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

## FEATURE

## Q&amp;A: Mélanie Bouteloup on Building Stronger Art Scenes

By [Leah Sandals](#)

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Over the past 10 years, curator Mélanie Bouteloup has spurred innovation in the Paris art scene through [Bétonsalon](#) (a space she co-founded) and its related initiatives. This week, she brings some of the lessons she's learned to Canada. Her exhibition "Something More than a Succession of Notes" opens at the [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#) tonight, and she also speaks at our free symposium [The Ecology of an Art Scene](#) on November 8 and 9 at Harbourfront Centre and Toronto City Hall. Here, Bouteloup share some of her strategies for making art communities stronger, and she answers questions about the Canadian art scene too.

## Q What, to you, is the most important part of an art ecology or art scene?

A Well, we started Bétonsalon 10 years ago because we found that the ecology of the art scene in Paris was not very well developed. We believed that for an art scene to be dynamic, you needed to have different kinds of spaces that interconnect with each other.

At that time, a decade ago, Paris had art schools, galleries and museums, but not so many artist-run or alternative spaces—the kinds of spaces that take risks, experiment, and work with young artists who may just be finishing school. We wanted to create this kind of space, and also activate networks so that people would circulate between schools, museums and galleries.

I think it is really important for the ecology of an art scene to have a circulation between its spaces. These spaces must actually work together—they can't work well separately without being connected in some way.

There are many ways art organizations can become connected. It can be in coordinating one small event, like a roundtable with people from different organizations. Or when you work with an artist, you can introduce him or her to some researchers who are working in a university or an art school, and then the artist can develop work using these resources.



**Q** How has Bétonsalon played out this desire to increase the circulation between different art spaces and grow a stronger art ecology in Paris? Can you provide some examples?

**A** One of the main objectives of Bétonsalon is to develop dialogue between academic research and artistic research, between different disciplines, and between professionals and amateurs. All of our projects are trying to mix different practices. Specifically, this means that at Bétonsalon, we don't only exhibit artists. We also exhibit works developed by other kinds of people.

I think it's very important for an art space—and also for an exhibition—to put different ways of approaching a topic into confrontation. Often when starting an exhibition, we start with a complex issue and proceed with research on it. For "Something More than a Succession of Notes," for example, we started with the 10-year anniversary of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This convention tried to find ways to register intangible forms of cultural heritage—but this begs the question of how do we register something that is in movement? Something that is in permanent invention?

In researching this exhibition's topic, I met different people. One, Pénélope Patrix, is an academic at the university where Bétonsalon is. One day, she gave a lecture that I attended by coincidence. The topic was Fado and whether the attempts to preserve this form of music were actually killing it. Patrix explained that on the one hand, the UNESCO acknowledgement of Fado as a form of intangible cultural heritage was good, because it enabled the state to buy archives for study of this form. On the other hand, the institutionalized form of Fado is quite different from the "messier" version in the cafes. So Pénélope's research is in the exhibition.

Another example in this exhibition relates to an artist, Tarek Atoui, who studies a form of Arab music improvisation. We invited him to work with different researchers in Paris. In the archives of the Musée Guimet they found documents relating to a 1932 congress debating whether writing this music down would actually kill it. So for our exhibition in Paris, we put some of these archival clippings into a book, and in Toronto, we are displaying some on a wall.

One of our other goals is to rethink how institutions should work and invite them to work more with artists. For instance, we have invited Camille Henrot to work with researchers in the National Museum of Natural History. It is quite new for this museum to have an artist inside, asking questions and—in an exhibition we are developing—mixing scientific objects with objects she would buy on eBay.

Another way of working with museums is that we did a seminar with the Musée du Quai Branly every month for a year. In these seminars, artists and architects addressed ways to decentre official art histories.

I like the fact that when we work with an institution, we kind of disturb their way of working a little bit. Some people in these institutions are really keen on that, because there is so much administrative hierarchy that it is hard for them to do it alone.

**Q** There are two Canadian or Canada-connected artists in "More Than a Succession of Notes." One is Ian Carr-Harris. Another is Johnny Kit Elswa. How did you connect with these artists or artworks?

**A** Last year, the Institut Français and the French consulate invited me to come to Toronto for a research trip. During one week, I met many people. At the time of the trip, I was already doing research on this exhibition.

Kitty Scott, curator of contemporary and modern art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, told me to look at Johnny Kit Elswa. Then, when I went to do research on him, I found the object we will be showing. In this one work, you have three different versions of a Haida myth—one handwritten by Elswa, one represented in a drawing by him, and one written by a journalist. This piece of paper shows that the telling of a story is always different depending on who is telling it.

I met with Ian Carr-Harris in a studio visit that same week. I decided to include some of his Books of Knowledge because, for me, they provided a subtle critique of the encyclopedic model, another theme of the show. The encyclopedic model has intended to represent the world and the sum of knowledge in the way that would embrace everything—but that's impossible!

**Q** Although it's clear that a week is only a very short period of time in which to get a sense of a city, what similarities and differences have you noticed so far between the Paris art scene and the Toronto art scene?

**A** Well, as you say, one week is too short to be able to grasp the ecology of a scene.



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What I have noticed is that Toronto's is very rich scene, with lots of different kinds of organizations. I get the sense so far, also, that they all know each other, and I think this is important.

There are lots of differences too—historical ones, cultural ones. One big difference is funding. In France, we still have public funding for the majority of institutions. Here, I learned that the AGO receives less than 40 per cent of its revenues from public funding. This is a big difference.

**Q Here's another unfair question: How do you perceive Canadian art and artists in general?**

**A** That's a very hard question!

I mean, today, it's not about nationality—this is important to say! We don't appreciate art or a specific artwork because it is coming from this place or that place. It's more about how you position yourself in our contemporary society. Being Canadian or French or South African—this is not what really counts.

**Q I've read that Bétonsalon has made attempts to bridge the city of Paris with its suburbs. Tensions between city and suburb are an issue in Toronto—some pundits even go so far as to attribute Toronto's current mayoral scandals to this tension. What have you learned in attempting to bridge city and suburb in an art context?**

**A** Well, first it's important to say that Bétonsalon is in the city of Paris, in the 13th arrondissement. We are not really at the intersection, exactly, between city and suburb. There are other places in Paris that really work on these issues. For example, Les laboratoires d'Aubervilliers is an art production centre in a suburb with a lot of different nationalities and communities, and it is trying to work with those communities.

We are, however, in a new district that is still under construction. It was a former industrial area and has been transformed into a university campus. And a university is like a micro-society. You have different kinds of people—and many are coming from the suburbs, actually—with different interests. Most of them don't care about art; they think art is something for the elite.

We are working to make people in the university believe that an art space is not just a place where you meet artists—it is also where you can debate, and where you can ask questions about something else than art.

This is really something that needs to be worked upon, because the general conception of art is far from that sense. Also, the image that is distributed in the media is around the art market, objects, and a lot of money. People don't really know that art can also be a place where we discuss social issues and mix different kinds of people. This is what we are trying to work on—this set of general misconceptions that can be found in both urban suburban contexts.

**Q Is there anything else you'd like people to know on the topic of healthy (or unhealthy) art ecologies?**

**A** The main point for me—and I think I will talk about it in the symposium—is my definition of culture. To me, culture is produced through the confrontation, opposition and tension of heterogenous elements.

I think that when you have conflicts between positions, then you have culture. I also think that art spaces should be contact zones—places where you can encounter these different tensions and positions.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

The free symposium *The Ecology of an Art Scene* takes place at Harbourfront Centre and Toronto City Hall on November 8 and 9. For more information, visit [canadianart.ca/paristoronto](http://canadianart.ca/paristoronto).

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